

TRACES OF POST COLONIALISM IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE LOWLAND'

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ABSTRACT

The intellectual history of the world and the social, cultural, economic and political history of the world have clearly presented the fact that the advent of a particular form of critical, theoretical and philosophical thoughts with its synchronic realities poses a relevant antithesis which interrogates the existing or dominant realities. The advent of post colonial discourses has challenged the complex realities of imperialism and colonialism. It, on the one hand, questions the discursive practices but on the other, it also creates some dialectics or antinomy which results in the enrichment of the epistemic and cultural realities.

KEYWORDS: Post Colonialism, Transnational, Hybridity, Colonial Consciousness & Cultural Consciousness

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INTRODUCTION

Traces of Post colonialism in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Lowland'

It is said that History cannot be erased, though it can be repeated. Similarly, Colonization which is a part of history now, cannot be erased. Its traces can still be sensed even today; its imprints are visible on the society, language, culture, education and politics of the colonized. For instance, in the case of India, the British have left but their presence is still visible in the language, education and judicial system, in fact, the major part of the Indian Constitution is derived from British Constitution. The second part of the saying mentioned above, therefore, "history can be repeated", aptly suits the present form of Colonialism that is apparent in the form of Neo-Colonialism and Reverse Colonialism.

The induction of effects as a result of changes gives a way to the assimilation of different cultures and the evolution of brand new cultures. Cultural consciousness, Cultural relativism, Colonial consciousness, high and low culture and mass culture, under Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism has given room for the propagation of a new set of ideologies.

The character of Gauri in *The Lowland* can be set in clear and stark contrast with Ashima in *The Namesake*. Where Ashima remained rooted in her place of origin, Gauri was completely uprooted. For the former, family and family ties, native culture and customs were the priority, being in the foreign land, we rarely found the influence of the west upon her. The latter got rid of herself from every bonding and connection with the family. The western element of individualism seemed to be dominant upon Gauri; for the sake of her ambition, she abandoned every relation including her daughter. She appeared to be contented in her isolation and undisturbed and practical life without much involvement in the outer world. Ashima remained glued to her past and found solace in it while Gauri shed off her past; it was haunting her and that's why she always tried to escape it. In order to throw mud

over her past, to conceal it permanently, she embraced and imitated the western lifestyle. The aspects of western culture like individualism, living on their own, neither getting into the way of others nor allowing others to get into their way, are clearly visible in the character of Gauri. She is in complete separation from everything which she originally belonged to. She is purely in exile from her homeland, its culture and ethnic origin. Her character precisely sets an example of Post-modern feminist concept. Gauri breaks off the 'meta-narrative' which defines motherhood and which decides child as a sole responsibility of a woman; and the ideal woman is the one who sacrifices, suffers and behaves as an obedient wife. For instance, Gauri was not happy on receiving the compliment for her 'sari' from an American girl rather she was influenced by her outfits and wanted to look like her. "Gauri felt ungainly. She began to want to look like the other woman she noticed on the campus, like a woman Udayan had never seen her." (134)

Like other characters in Jhumpa's works, the character of Gauri once again presents the strong influence of the West upon the East. Gauri seems to run away from everything which could connect her with her past. In the example quoted below, we see her intense hatred toward her original identity and an immense desire to get rid of it. She slipped into a new western outlook; got her long hair shortened, replacing the 'sari' in her cupboards with western clothes.

On the dressing table was a pair of scissors that he normally kept in the kitchen drawer, along with clumps of hair. In one corner of the floor, all her saris, and her petticoats and blouses were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws. He opened her drawers and saw they were empty. She had destroyed everything... her hair hung bluntly along her jawbone, dramatically altering her face. She was wearing slacks and a gray sweater. (140,141)

Gauri had not felt the least guilt in breaking-off with her Indian identity. She was not least repentant for creating the mess by tearing and cutting of her Indian outfits. The animal like manner in which she destroyed her saris can be symbolic of her ferocious urge to trample over and crush her Indian identity forever. She gave an easy and permanent 'in' to new by discarding the old. Examples for the same: "not apologizing for the spectacular mess she'd made, just putting away new clothes she'd bought, then throwing the old things into garbage bags." (141)

One day they went into a sari store to buy saris for her grandmother and Deepa. White ones for her grandmother; colored ones for Deepa...Can we buy one for Ma? Bela asked. She never wears them Bela. (205)

Along with the change in looks, there was a striking change in her inner landscape as well. She used the western 'freedom' to break every shackle coming between her and her ambition. In the blind pursuit of her ambition, she ignored her duties toward her family and neglected the needs of her daughter. Here, the dominant factor of the west is 'I'; it seems to overlap the Indian family idea of 'We'. So dragged by the dominant factor of 'I', she left Subhash who brought her all the goodness; she also left Bela as a sole responsibility of Subhash. Her character showed a sheer separation from whatever she was belonged to in the past. Her decision was firm without the slightest doubt and any touch of ambivalence. Gauri loved to stay aloof, away, at distance from everything which connected her with the past. For example, in the novel, she found nothing to relate herself with other Indian women on the campus.

He was relieved to see Gauri mixing with the other women...The women seemed friendly. Who were they? I don't remember their names, she said... The enthusiasm she'd mustered in the company of others had been discarded. She seemed tired, perhaps annoyed. He wondered if she had not really enjoyed herself, if she'd only been pretending... Should we invite few of them to our place, sometime...I don't want to spend my time with them...I have nothing in common with

them, she said. (139,140)

Throughout the novel, the word 'animal' and 'wilderness' have been associated with Gauri. It seems to suggest that Gauri received an un-curtailed freedom, it appears as if an animal has escaped from the prison and is free to practice its wilderness without any restriction. In India, Gauri was confined within the walls of her in-law's house but after coming to America she took advantage of unrestricted freedom. In the examples quoted below, the association of Gauri with the words like '**animal**' and '**wilderness**' also seem to suggest the general wilderness and 'barbarous nature' that the **West has always referred to in context to the East.**

"Her animal whimpering startled him; it was the sound of the scream stifled by a clenched jaw, a closed mouth. An articulate but wordless fury." (138)

"In one corner of the floor, all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws." (141)

"That wilderness was her only freedom." (212)

The character of Subhash can be seen in the light of Hybridity. The term 'Hybridity' as mentioned in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2006) is,

The term has been most extensively articulated and theorized by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha introduces the term first within the colonial arena and he, amongst others, has since transported it to other fields of analysis in post-colonial contexts, where hybridity has now become a central term in discussions of multiculturalism and diaspora. It is, within Bhabha's theoretical lexicon, closely related to terms such as 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence', and is embedded within a wider framework of concern with what Bhabha calls the 'Third Space'. This 'Third Space' allows us to conceive of the identities of cultures in terms that transcend the binary dialectic between 'us/them', 'insider/outsider', 'inclusion/exclusion'. It also enables discussion of cultural difference in terms that do not exoticize it for in such exoticism Bhabha detects an Othering principle that distances difference and disavows the constitution of the Self by the Other. (112)

In Subhash, there is a **balanced mix of both east and west.** He despised and opposed the orthodox practices meant for widows. He argued with his mother for the sake of Gauri who was ignored to live a lifeless life like an object. Gauri was not allowed to eat fish and to put on colourful clothes, she was confined to her room, and she was not allowed to mingle with other members of the family. Subhash like an ideal Anglo-Indian discarded all the meaningless conventions and married Gauri to free her from the shackles of orthodox practices. The character of Subhash is presented under western knowledge and education which is again used to provide a contrast between east and west. If we look into the past, the West has always projected it as a saviour of the East, as a beneficiary which is devoted to rescuing the east from the clutches of uncivilized and barbarous practices. We can see the character of Subhash in a similar context. Subhash influenced by western education and thought is shown as a protector of Gauri from stringent conventional practices in the east.

Where is she? he asked. Who? Gauri...She takes her meals in the kitchen... He didn't say what came to his mind. That Udayan would have hated them for segregating her, for observing such customs. (92)

You've taken away her colored clothes, the fish and meat from her plate. These are customs, his mother said. It's

demeaning. Udayan would have never wanted her to live this way. (114)

In the lines quoted below, Subhash exalted America as the only place with hope and scope for a better, unrestricted life for Gauri and her child. The lines below reveals the mindset of an Indian representing the mindsets of many other Indians, according to which, all synonyms for the word 'goodness' can be linked only with America or the West at large.

...in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again...explaining that the child needed a father. In America, it could be raised without the burden of what had happened...He told her not to think about what people might say, how his parents would react. If she went with him to America, he promised her, it would all cease to matter. (119)

The western touch has also influenced 'the father' in Subhash. He is unlike Indian authoritative fathers'. In India where there is a patriarchal form of a society, where children look up to their father to seek his permission before taking any decision; contrary to this, in America, children have full freedom to make decisions for themselves and for being responsible for those decisions. Contrary to any Indian father, Subhash gave Bela full freedom to go according to her decisions, without imposing his ideologies upon her; he never bound her with Indian customs meant for daughters'. Neither, we find Subhash losing his temper on Bela's expecting a child before marriage. He never cross questioned her about her random trips from place to place. He gave her full space like any other western child expects to have.

He wondered if she would join, if maybe she would want to go back to India. She was twenty-one, old enough to make such decisions. (221)

He had learned to set aside the responsibility he'd once believed would be his: to do his part to secure a daughter's future by pairing it with another person's. If he'd raised her in Calcutta it would have been reasonable for him to bring up the subject of her marriage. Here it was considered meddlesome, out-of-bounds. (262)

In India, it is disgraceful when a daughter gets pregnant before marriage. But Shubhash dealt with the situation in a balanced and gentle way.

I'm pregnant; she said...She wanted to keep the child. She wanted to become a mother...He began gently... And you are welcome here, always. (264)

In autumn her daughter was born. After she became a mother she told Subhash it made her love him more, knowing what he'd done. (271)

We can also compare the character of Subhash to a transnational. We can see him not much affected by the Indian conventional practices nor bothered about the bold decisions of the people and open culture of a western country. He seems to be perfectly balanced with the two – east and west. He is not out of his mind when Bela came to stay with him after getting pregnant before marriage. He is fine with his decision to get married after becoming a grandfather. He married Elise, his friend's wife and Bela's school teacher. His attitude towards Gauri is also like an American, not even once he tried to bring her back; neither he appeared much affected by her absence.

...Elise comes every day...When Dadu marries her I'll have a grandmother, Meghna said. (311)

The trip was a honeymoon, the man's first, though he was married once before... The man has gained two sons, a second daughter in addition to his own. There are seven children...There is no use wondering what might have happened if

the man had met her in his forties, or in his twenties. He would not have married her then. (330)

The character of Bela is another example of a perfect second generation Indian immigrant. She lives and goes by her mind. She is not least bothered about her connection with India. We can see her in pure separation from the land and its culture. Her indifference was clearly visible when she was asked by her father to accompany him to India to see her grandmother. She is a second generation immigrant who is unaffected by the colonial consciousness and the cultural difference between east and west. The nature of her character also depicts her transnational attitude. She is like a wanderer, free from restrictions, who loves to keep on wandering from place to place, without getting attached to a particular place or people.

The summer after she graduated from high school she didn't travel with him when news came from Deepa, saying his mother had suffered a stroke. She told him she wanted to stay in Rhode Island, spend time with the friends from whom she'd soon be separated. (220)

It became her life: a series of jobs on farms across the country, some close by, others far. Washington State, Arizona, Kentucky, Missouri. Rural towns he had to look on a map, towns where she said sometimes there were no stoplights for miles. (222)

In *The Lowland* **colonial consciousness is clearly visible** in the characters developed in the Indian setting rather than the ones shifted to America. The 'Special treatment' or the 'welcoming VIP' kind of hospitality is given to the people who return from a foreign land. British had instilled this notion in the psyche of Indians that the west or English or foreign is better, superior and respectful, therefore it should always be rated higher and exclusive. The glimpses of such a psyche are visible in the minor characters of *The Lowland*. Deepa, a servant, referred Bela as 'Memsahib' because in pre-independent India, English women were called as 'Memsahib' because they were believed to be educated, superior, higher in class, knowledge and status. Therefore, Deepa used it for Bela who visited her grandmother from a foreign land with foreign manners. Bela was considered too delicate to drink regular drinking water meant for Indians, so her grandmother instructed Deepa to boil and cool the water for Bela to drink.

Deepa wore a sari, and a gem in her nostril, and she called Bela Memsahib. (193)

Not that water. Give her boiled water. She's not made to survive here. (194)

In addition to the water that was boiled and cooled for her to drink, water was warmed every morning for her bath. Her grandmother said Bela would catch a cold otherwise, even though the weather was so hot. (195)

The examples of cultural differences and cultural diversity are also present in the novel. There is a wide difference between the thinking of east and west. In the west, decisions are based upon one's personal choice while in the east a stamp of permission by the elders of the family is always required before going to take any decision. Elders' actions and reactions are always taken into count.

The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running as if a fire at its back. (34)

Individualism and nuclear families form the social structure in the west, opposite to it east is more based on joint family structure. Togetherness and joint families is the core of Indian social organization. Hence, the family ties and bonding among the members are less fragile in comparison to the west.

He explained that daughters joined their in-laws after they married and sons stayed at home. That generations didn't separate as they did here. (67)

Extra marital affairs are a common part of western society; people do not bother much about such choices while in India it is entirely the opposite, people opting for such choices are disrespected and often discarded from society. While Subhash was in America, he got indulged in an affair with a married American woman.

His parents' disapproval threatened to undermine what he was doing, lodged like a silent gatekeeper at the back of his mind. But without his parents there, he was able to keep pushing back their objection... (77)

'The Lowland' has given ample opportunities to analyze the emergence of a new set of ideas as it contains the amalgamation of cultures from the host nation (America) and home country of immigrants.

In the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, the presence of Colonial consciousness is more strongly visible and its effects on the characters are starkly apparent in comparison to cultural consciousness. We can see Gauri is colonially conscious; she rated west/foreign as superior and something which set the standards for all goodness and success that one aspires to attain. The notion of colonial consciousness is also noticeable in the minor characters who arrange special reception and act extra generously towards the relatives who return from a foreign land. It is also manifested by showing high and low culture; high culture represented by the West and low culture indicating towards East.

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